

VSRA AGM

Notes of the Annual General Meeting held at the Rochester Hotel on 13 March 2024

Present: approximately 40 members of the Association, with Councillor Gillian Arrindell in attendance at the final stages

1. Chairman's statement

It is now heading for a decade since I became Chairman of VSRA. I note this for two reasons. One is that a decade is long enough for anyone to be notionally in charge of anything, and I do hope that someone – perhaps in this room – will in the next year or so consider putting themselves forward to take over.

The job is not, usually, particularly onerous. If you should be minded to consider the role, please do come up for a discreet chat afterwards, or contact me via the address on the website.

The second reason I mention my length of tenure is that it does give me some perspective when I say that the last year has been unusual: I have never seen a year when Macmillan's observation about the problems of "events, dear boy, events" seemed more pertinent. This year, local 'events' seem to have been queuing up for attention.

The most unwelcome was TfL's needless destruction of the Lambeth North, or 'Palm', roundabout, now a fait accompli, was suddenly 'sprung' on us with almost no notice, after a consultation half a decade ago in which locals made their objections perfectly clear. This counted for nothing to TfL whose acolytes, when challenged, would invariably intone that this was "the most dangerous junction in London".

As it turned out - and it required a lot of pressure and even Fol requests to find this out – this claim *was* true... but only if you tally up *all* incidents, such as sprained wrists. But what about *serious* injuries? If you examine the data, it transpires that you're *more* likely to have a *serious* injury at a traffic-light-controlled junction – just the sort which TfL is hell-bent on replacing the roundabout with. So we have a bizarre situation where – in reaction to the death of a cyclist, long ago, in proximity to the Lambeth Bridge junction – TfL is transforming the junction in a way which makes it *more* likely you'll have a serious accident there!

Moving closer to home, we turn to Warwick Way, which is not just 'our' local shopping centre, but also, as former Chairman Michael Wade has pointed out, an important access route from the West for people who live in and around the Square.

The plans to turn a key section of Warwick into a one way street seem to have been cooked up in thoroughly un-transparent way by a small coterie of Pimlico locals with the connivance of the Council, and without any regard to the wider community which regards Warwick Way as their 'town centre'. Only at a later stage, thanks to the efforts of some of our councillors, was there any recognition by the Council that we are local residents too, and that perhaps it might make sense to consult us. But, but the time you get to a formal 'consultation' it is of course too late, and the scheme not looks set to be introduced.

I was today informed by the Council as follows:

"Officers are working through the responses to the Traffic Management Order consultation at the moment, preparing detailed responses to the themes raised in relation to the scheme. The plan is to present this to the Cabinet Member for consideration alongside next steps in March. We expect to be able to confirm a way forward in Spring 2024."

It is just possible, of course, that the scheme will, by making Warwick Way a more pleasant space for pedestrians, help reverse the serious difficulties in which our local shopping area finds itself, with too many major sites unoccupied for far too long. But I would suggest that, by pandering to some rather sectional Pimlico interests, the Council is totally failing to take the holistic view the area is crying out for.

Then we turn to the question of views. I once asked a New Yorker friend what he missed there, compared to London. "Sky", he said. Well, we can't be complacent about sky here. Witness, for example, the recent closing of the vista at the far end of Warwick Way, by Ebury Bridge. Did *anyone* in this room know that these vast towers, quite at odds with their surroundings, were going to happen? And does anyone in this room know that another *seven* towers are planned for the same cluster? I only know this because, passing the other day, I happened to enquire of a particularly chatty workman.

Our own particular imperilled view is from the Square, down Maunsel Street, towards Parliament's Victoria Tower. We hope the Council will reject the

Medway Street application. There is still scope, I believe, for residents to make their opinions on this known.

And finally, on the 'issues' front, we have the Gordon Hospital. As you'll presumably know, the building was closed as a psychiatric hospital during COVID, and a consultation has recently taken place about the form in which it might re-open. From a local perspective, the good news is that there is general recognition that the building is hopelessly unsuited to being a hospital, and especially a psychiatric hospital, and – given the tiny floor plates and antiquated lifts – it would simply be too expensive to bring it up to contemporary standards.

So, is it to close for good? No. Nowadays, much psychiatric care which would once have been delivered to long-stay in-patients is now – apparently largely successfully – delivered 'in the community, and part of the Gordon looks set to become the main local centre for psychiatric daycare for Westminster, K&C and Brent. But that will still leave much of the premises without a function. What's to become of that? We'll revert to this later as a separate issue.

In conclusion to this unavoidably rather lengthy report, I would like to thank the committee for their help during the year, and in particular those who've undertaken real jobs: Kyle for the party, Louisa for tennis, Jack for the accounting and Felicity for the continuing evolution of our now-very-automated membership systems.

I would also like to thank the hotel for its support of the Association, by hosting us both at last year's successful Summer Party, and today.

2. Treasurer's statement

The membership income for VSRA has shown an increase in 2023 partly because of the numbers of households applying and also from switching to more efficient internet-based subscription and payment collection.

The cost of tennis membership and fob deposit fees are set annually to ensure that the money raised covers the charges incurred for renting the courts from Westminster School. This service has been set up to be a cost neutral and not intended for profit.

The association holds on to fob deposits for members at the end of the tennis season if they want to maintain priority for applications in the following year - hence the liability on the balance sheet for "fob deposits carried forward" amounting to £880.

The most significant expense for VSRA is the tennis court fees - for 2023 the invoice has not yet been received so an estimated amount has been included as a liability. Other expenses, which overall amounted to approximately £1,150 for 2023 (about £150 as a liability), comprise IT subscriptions/charges, printing leaflets, music costs for our summer party and bank charges.

Overall the accumulated surplus held by VSRA at the end of 2023 shown on the balance sheet amounted to £22,839.95 - an increase of £1,656.73 compared to the end of 2022. This cash is held mainly in a current account to try to keep interest earned by the association below the limit that would trigger the need to submit tax returns which would otherwise entail a lot of additional work and responsibility.

VSRA does make charitable donations after the summer party and for 2023 this was directed to The Cardinal Hume Centre. The amount donated is always the entire receipts from selling the raffle tickets. Please note this has not been treated as an income or expense for VSRA on the income/expenditure sheet.

3. Tennis report

In Louisa Taylor's absence, the Chairman read the tennis report. This concentrated on the importance of maintaining good relationships with the School, and therefore the observance by of the rules, both by tennis members and by members generally.

The Chairman mentioned that henceforth only VSRA members who have paid their subscriptions by the end of February in any year will be able to keep a place on the tennis waiting list. In early-March, such members will be invited to take up available tennis memberships in the order in which they joined the waiting list.

4. Re-election of the Committee

There being no nominations for new committee appointments, or resignations from the existing committee, the existing committee was re-elected en bloc.

Richard Harden (Chairman)

Jack Jerjian (Treasurer)

Louisa Taylor (Tennis)

Kyle ap Simon (Party)

Felicity Bullock (Membership)

Julia Record (Marketing)

David Sizer

5. AOB

There was significant discussion on three areas already addressed on the Chairman's report (a-c), and a number of new points raised from the floor.

a) Warwick Way

Michael Wade addressed the meeting. Many members appeared to feel strongly on the topic, to the extent that it was agreed that a meeting should be confirmed explicitly to consider the issue, and decide what further representations, if any, VSRA should make.

b) Gordon Hospital

John Wilson addressed the meeting, and there was also input from Councillor Arrindell (Note 1). It became apparent that 'Option 3' (use of the building as a daycare centre only) was perhaps less of a fait accompli than had been thought. The Committee was mandated to continue to address the issue with particular regard to finding out what is, exactly, proposed for the entirety of the building, and seeking a mechanism to anticipate and address ASB and other issues which may result.

Note

Shortly after the the meeting, the Councillor wrote as follows...

"Regarding the Gordon Hospital, see below a summary of where we are in this process:(JHOSC stands for the Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee).

The Inner West London Mental Health Services Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee held five public meetings to scrutinise the proposed substantive change to mental health service provision by Central North West London Foundation Trust (CNWL).

The meetings of the JHOSC provided constructive critical friend challenge, amplified the voices and concerns of the public, worked to drive improvement in public services and the cross-party group of members came to their conclusions with an independent mind.I would like to put my thanks on record to my colleagues who are members of this Committee, as well as the representations we have received from CNWL and ICB, HealthWatch, Professor Jill Manthorpe, organisations in the community and voluntary sector and those who have observed or contributed to the meetings.

The JHOSC submitted its evidence-based and independent conclusions on Thursday 29 February. It commented on the service reconfiguration proposals as well as the adequacy of the consultation. The JHOSC requires consideration of the recommendations it has set out by CNWL and ICB within 28 days.

At the end of April, CNWL/ ICB will be providing a report to the JHOSC which summaries the consultation outcomes. The JHOSC will meet to scrutinise this, as well as invite independent experts and others to give comment on the patient voice.

The evidence collected from this meeting, and at previous meetings, will be used to produce a more substantial report and the JHOSC would ask that the report and recommendations are responded to in the Decision-Making Business Case.

The Business Case has been scheduled to be taken as a decision at the ICB meeting on 16 July. The decision will not be implemented until September to give the JHOSC time to review and scrutinise the decision."

c) Medway Street

Chris Whitty addressed the meeting on the undesirability of the plans for Louise House (Note 2). He encouraged all present to make objections known. He noted that protection of views, per se, is not a valid ground for objection, but that encroaching on a UNESCO World Heritage Site, or adversely affecting a conservation area, is.

Note

"This is the text of Chris Whitty's objection to the planned new floors to Louise House, on the website at Westminster Council. It includes some of the key facts and parts of the Westminster City plan.

Re Louise House apart-hotel, 33 Medway St.

It is rare that a single proposal impinges directly on 2 conservation areas (Medway St. and Vincent Sq.) and a World Heritage Site as this one does. It does so through its massing, its height and its intrusive design. It flies contrary to the principles of a World Heritage Site, and to several of Westminster Council's own published design principles. It would be possible to have a sympathetic redevelopment on this site- this one is anything but. Some of the heritage statement, I regret to say, reads as advocacy to try to downplay the impact of this intrusive modern re-development on this sensitive site.

1). UNESCO World Heritage Site. There are only 28 in the UK. The Palace of Westminster was inscribed as a cultural World Heritage Site in 1987 in recognition of its international importance and 'Outstanding Universal Value' (OUV). Westminster Council states that 'any development or proposal which impacts on a World Heritage Site must be assessed in terms of its OUV'. Unless I have missed it I see no such assessment in this proposal, despite the fact that it will substantially change, and degrade, some of the iconic perspectives of the Victoria Tower from this south-westerly direction, especially over the Vincent Sq. playing fields and down Maunsell Street- much enjoyed by residents and visitors from around the world. It does this by blocking out some of the current skyline, by raising the skyline (almost obliterating the current iconic view of Victoria Tower from some settings), by its mass, and by its very intrusive and unsympathetic and jarring design and colouring. UNESCO have already expressed significant concern about some recent planning decisions and highlighted that "important views of the property are vulnerable to development projects..... the integrity of the [Palace of Westminster] site is under threat". Have they been consulted?

2). Vincent Square Conservation Area. I would invite you to look at the photo on front page of the Council's own conservation area audit, which shows why this is going to have such an impact on this area. The development would stick out in the middle of this iconic cityscape. It is an example, to use the Council's words 'where the roofline is exposed to long views from public places'. The mass, significantly raising the skyline (both the main development and the very intrusive lift house obscure or impinge on Victoria Tower), the out-of-keeping colour, and the in-your-face design will all change this irrevocably. The current Westminster Plan says "It's absolutely vital that development must never be at the expense of our heritage. Our new approach to managing development will make sure planning for Westminster is about conservation not just preservation, and building tomorrow's heritage today". The design, if viewed from this direction (eg Maunsell Street or across the playing fields) infringes Design Principles 38B, (the character and appearance of the existing area, adjacent buildings and heritage assets), 38F (contemporary architecture and use of modern materials only where they respect and enhance their surroundings and integrate and better reveal Westminster's heritage and existing townscape), 39B (many aspects, including that development protects the skyline, prominence and iconic silhouettes of the Palace of Westminster), and 40D, 40E and 40F (Roof extensions will only be supported in principle where they do no impact adversely on heritage assets).

3). Medway St. Conservation Area, which Louise House sits in the middle of although just outside the boundaries. This building will dominate what the Council audit describes one of its advantages "the small scale and domestic character of the majority of the buildings." It has three Grade II listed buildings and several designated as Unlisted Buildings of Merit. It is currently a very sympathetic grouping. All the aspects of the Design Principles mentioned above apply here. Roof profiles are important to this conservation area as laid out in the audit paras 4.23-4.31. The conservation area will be substantially changed if this proposal in its current form goes ahead given the extent that Louise House will dominate it.

4). Whilst the historical background of the heritage statement is broadly accurate, I was startled to see it described the impact of the proposed development on Vincent Square conservation area including Maunsell St as 'neutral'. It would only be neutral if the proposed large extension was architecturally as good as the Victoria Tower World Heritage Site which it will obscure, and if it was sympathetic in style to the local architecture including many important townscapes. It is neither (and obviously neither).

5). It would be perfectly possible to infill between the current blocks of Louise House in a sympathetic style keeping the current roofline of the two blocks (excluding the redundant water tank) without any of these disadvantages. It could even be done in a way which enhanced the townscape if the current, redundant and highly visible, water tank was removed. But the current mass, substantial impact on the skyline both of the whole design, the prominent lift house that will extend even higher, and very unsympathetic style mean the current proposal is contrary to multiple Westminster Council design principles affecting two conservation areas and well known perspectives on a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

6). It is also contrary to widespread local opinion. I only received my letter on the 30th Oct, giving only 2 weeks to respond to a major proposal with many documents which will have a substantial impact on the area. If others also received it then I cannot see how this meets statutory notice, let alone a reasonable time to undertake a proper response (I would like reassurance all others did receive their letter with 21 days to respond). Many are only now becoming aware of the scale of the impact this will have on the conservation areas."

An approximation of the effect of the raised roof height:



d) ASB

Councillor Arrindell encouraged the use of the WCC "Report It" function - <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/report-it>

e) Dog mess

The chairman noted that this was a perennial issue.

f) Westminster College advertising boards/banners

A number of members felt strongly on this incursion into the streetscape, and the Committee was urged to make appropriate representations.